

*Interdisciplinary Political Studies*<http://siba-esu.unisalento.it/index.php/idps>

ISSN: 2039-8573 (electronic version)

IdPS, Issue 4(1) 2018: 239-242

DOI: 10.1285/i20398573v4n1p239

Published on July 15, 2018

BOOK REVIEW

By More Than Providence. Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783, by Michael J. Green. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, pp.760.

Juliette Schwak*Tokyo International University*

In *By more than providence*, Michael J. Green provides a rich historical account of America's grand strategy towards the Asia-Pacific, explaining all the dimensions of its foreign policy from the late 18th century to Barack Obama's Asian pivot. The book is written in an entertaining style and is rich in details and biographical elements to provide context to the strategic thought of the many statesmen, such as John Quincy Adams, Theodore Roosevelt, Alfred Thayer Mahan, John Hay, Matthew Calbraith Perry or Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who have crafted America's geostrategic policies towards the Asia-Pacific. The book is organized in fifteen chapters, each starting with a narrative account of the period under study and ending with a welcome reflection on the strategic legacy of the key actors introduced in the chapter. Green shows that while World War II was decisive in the consolidation of the United States' strategy in the Pacific, the American reach to the re-

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike 3.0 Italian License

gion largely pre-dated World War II, and began with the travels of merchants, missionaries and naval officers in the late 18th century.

The book explains America's Pacific strategy through defensive realism, as America sought to protect itself against threats to its territorial security and gain access to trade routes in order to spread goods and ideas in the region. Green identifies five tensions characterizing American foreign policy towards Asia across the centuries he considers. Firstly, American strategic thinking had oscillated between Europe or Asia as its vital terrain of foreign affairs. Secondly, the construction of a grand strategy in the Pacific has repeatedly been weakened by an oscillation between China and Japan, and between the adoption of a continental or a maritime policy. Should the United States become a maritime power in Asia, and therefore concentrate on balancing against a potential threat from another maritime power like Japan, or should they concentrate on the threats coming from the Asian continent, and particularly China? A third tension lies in the definition of America's defensive line against potentially hegemonic powers in the region. Fourthly, America's grand strategy in the Pacific has been challenged by tensions between two objectives aiming to secure an ideational environment favorable to American influence in the region: support for self-determination versus support for the diffusion of democratic values. Nowhere was this clearer than in the United States' strategy in the Philippines, where American leaders swung back and forth between anti-colonialism and universalism. Finally, America's grand strategy in the region was split between protectionism and free trade.

Green concludes that despite its unevenness, American grand strategy in the Pacific has been effective, contributing 'in the aggregate to a more prosperous and just Asia-Pacific region' (p.541). The book provides little evidence to support

this general claim. The arguments waver between realism and liberalism. In the conclusion, Green reasserts the prominence of a realist vision of the Asia-Pacific, dismissing regionalism and transnational challenges and arguing for the persistence of a state-centered approach to international politics in the region. But he also seems to support a liberal strategy and advises policy-makers to maintain American power in the Asia-Pacific through the spread of democracy and free trade. For instance, rather than introducing a pivot to Asia, they are exhorted to overcome the tension between Asia and Europe to cooperate with the latter and support liberal democratic norms in the Asia-Pacific. He argues that most states in the region enthusiastically support democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and that there is no competing model currently available to Asian states. Therefore, the United States should continue to support civil society, good governance and free trade to protect US strategic interests. The landslide 2016 election of President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and the subsequent election of U.S. President Donald Trump cast doubts on Green's prescriptions.

Perhaps scholars or students of International Relations adopting critical perspectives and interested in the global economy might regret that the book focuses on Great Power politics and largely ignores the role that the region has played in the global diffusion of American capitalism. Green prefers to emphasize geostrategic factors instead of imperialism or ethnocentrism to explain American expansion in the Pacific, notably in the Philippines and China: 'the strategy was essentially determined by interest in *power*' (p. 103). Yet, since Green essentially relies on a realist perspective, he treats power as a category that is not itself subject to inquiry. Despite these limits, the book is an excellent contribution to studies of American foreign policy and the international relations of the Asia-Pacific.

Juliette Schwab